

APRIL 13, 1972

Hard killing frost has set back most of the Shortgrass Country. Mesquites have been defoliated in the low and the highlands. Winter returned to a country that was already banking on an early spring. Faces that were reflecting the joy of the oncoming season are now grim and pensive. The threat of the feed wagons hangs heavy on our minds.

Our hopes should have waited for the scissortails to assure that spring was really here. Old timers tried to tell everybody to hold off until that omen arrived, but we couldn't listen. Home gardeners were planting as early as late February; the dumbheaded fruit trees started blooming as if their taproots were touching the Florida Peninsula.

I wasn't sure until the scissortails arrived yesterday whether they were going to come this year. It was a relief to see them. Birdwatching has become so popular that I was afraid the spring birds might be delayed down south, striking a pose for some bird club visiting Mexico. Every other sign has gone haywire, so it wasn't hard to imagine this one going astray.

All birds have changed their personalities. Once-demure mother robins act as naughty as the cocks do. The other day I saw a timid little Mexican dove carrying on worse than a catbird. At any time, you are likely to run across a hummingbird that thinks he's a bigger shot than a woodpecker. People staring at birds has ruined their sense of modesty. Those over in town won't take a bath unless there's a crowd to watch them.

In other times, I used to look forward to seeing the birds come back to the country. Hearing them sing was a perfect way to forget the agonies of winter. However, that was before you had to carry a pair of binoculars and wear tennis shoes to qualify as a nature lover.

We ranchers got out natured so bad by the townspeople that we won't ever catch up. From the way the story goes now, you'd think that the herders were as cold blooded as the city people that fight pigeons off the town squares. (Don't think those city folks won't put the old hocus pocus to a pigeon when a pigeon panic breaks out. If you don't believe me, just try being a backstop for a bunch of city pigeons some day.)

Strange that bird killers don't surface in the ranch communities. I've lived out at Mertzon for 44 years. I guess that hasn't been long enough to meet the real killers. All the killing I hear about around here are the notrump hands that perish at the bridge clubs and the doublesixes that die at the dominoe hall.

Things sure did change fast, didn't they? On one day, the ranchers were fighting a lonely struggle against salt water pollution and soil erosion. The next day, we were the scourge of all the natural scheme.

The licensing of city folks as nature lovers was the swiftest movement to ever hit this country. After they'd besmudged and besmugged the atmosphere and asphalted and concreted every piece of ground they could surround, they suddenly became the champions of nature. Once they'd run the rivers and lakes full of their waste material, they felt free to give the herders hell for fighting the coyotes and horn flies. When they were through overcrowding the parks, they didn't mind at all demanding more space.

I blame us ranchers for a lot of the trouble. We didn't stay informed. Just the other day an old boy said that he was getting tired of being kicked around and run over all the

time by the environmentalists. So as a test, I asked him which was hurting worse - "the being kicked around" or "the being run over."

He couldn't say. There he was, a grown man, and didn't have the slightest idea of which chousing was bothering him the most. Had he been called before a Senate Committee, he couldn't have made a good witness. I don't like to knock a soul brother, but we are going to have to learn to specifically point out our wounds.

People who are pushing us off the land are going to be sorry some day. It's said 500,000 people leave the rural areas every year. And don't you believe they are leaving because of bad health.